



## Jan Murray - *Paperwork*

Exhibition Dates: 9th April - 6th May 2021

Celebration: Tuesday 13th April, 6-8pm

Essay by Sean Lowry / Curated by Lucy Foster

Before we recognise any other discernible differences between art objects and non-art objects, we tend to draw upon symbolic differences activated through their context of presentation in order to understand that we are indeed looking at art. Without the accompanying apparatus of a recognisable artworld environment, some works of contemporary art might struggle to transcend arbitrariness. Most typically, these situations arise when artists use readymade elements drawn from everyday life. Historically, this problem of “literal indiscernibility” was discussed as part of American philosopher and art historian Arthur C Danto’s nomination of the “Artworld” (as an exclusive capitalised proper noun). Today, we are perhaps a little more willing to acknowledge the existence of many differently configured artworlds and associated ontologies. For American art historian Pamela M. Lee, although presenting art outside an “artworld” is logically impossible, it is nevertheless possible to shift the focus of our analysis to the “work of art’s world”. Perhaps it is here that the artificial nature of categorical distinctions between art objects and “everything else” can be more readily played with.

Despite the ubiquity of the readymade approach, another increasingly common tendency in contemporary art is found in the meticulous and often virtuosic production of exacting facsimiles of objects that initially appear to be found, and yet upon closer inspection, are actually handmade.

This is the realm in which Jan Murray is a master illusionist. Murray’s *Paperwork*, for example, consists of a series of small oil on canvas board paintings, each offering a remarkable verisimilitude of everyday bureaucratic and administrative ephemera. What is real? What is an illusion? Murray re-presents what appear to be everyday functional objects, and then invites us to look again. At first glance, given that these works are so fastidiously executed, the viewer could easily assume that they are indeed looking at everyday office stationery. Looking closer, we see carefully painted bulldog clips that look tangibly three dimensional. But then, almost as if she is deliberately contaminating her own system, we discover that a couple of the bulldog clips are indeed actual bulldog clips. Just as we begin to suspend a sense of disbelief, Murray throws us another red herring. This is contemporary *trompe l’oeil* at its best. The tradition of illusionistic trickery in painting is rich and varied. The *trompe l’oeil* technique—an illusionistic method applied in both painting and architecture—was initially developed in the ancient world and later redeployed to great effect during the Renaissance. Later, in Modernism, it became a device for destabilising established modes of representation. In Murray’s hands, this technique takes painting right to the edge of a fuzzily demarcated relationship with the world around it. Perhaps, by deliberately working so close to the borders of arbitrariness, Murray reminds us that painting remains capable of maintaining a dynamic relationship with the continuum of everyday existence.



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